

NIGHT FIGHTERS VERSUS IMPOSSIBLE
A.E. Septinelli

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On Counseling the Blind

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Night Fighters Versus Impossible, Inc.

A. E. SEPTINELLI

When J. K. Northrup, of Northrup Aircraft, Inc., named his fighter plane the "Night Fighter" and then applied the term to his blind workers on the production line, he set in operation a chain of significant ideas, summing up the entire philosophy of work for the blind.

Spiritually, practically, and psychologically, all of us, whether blind or sighted, who are engaged in the work of counseling, training, and placing the blind, are fighting darkness—fighting misunderstanding of the aims and ambitions of the blind.

Too often we meet sales resistance in the form of "it can't be done," or "it's impossible."

But is it impossible?

"Man can't fly," said the know-it-alls. Yet the Wright Brothers did it.

"You can't run a boat with steam," said certain men of reputation. Yet Fulton eliminated the sailing vessel with his revolutionary invention.

These and many others were the Night Fighters of their time who, with frontal attacks, conquered Impossible, Inc.

If, therefore, you are willing to accept the philosophy that it *can* be done, regardless of how impossible it seems, the problem is not *Where can the blind work?* or *How many should be placed in one department?* or *Can our blind friends do this or that?* or even *Is he too old to work?* It becomes a matter of imagination and ingenuity on the part of workers for the blind. They know, through experience, that there is no occupation or phase of an occupation

which excludes our blind friends from employment.

Through adequate counseling, physical restoration, training, and placement, we can eliminate, I am convinced, such terms as "non-feasible" and "non-susceptible to training."

Placing Is Selling

This discussion will deal specifically with some phases and techniques of placement. I will comment briefly on counseling, physical restoration, and training.

As to counseling I would say that, important as technical knowledge may be on the part of the counselor, it is far more important that he talk *with* the counselee—not above him or beneath him, but with him. He is to be the guide in helping the counselee make his own choice of an occupation.

With reference to physical restoration, which in this case really means sight restoration as well as preventing blindness, we should consider seriously the "luxury" of surgery as a means of giving our applicants a more favorable appearance.

In regard to training, let us remember that although the state shops or sheltered workshops fill a very important need in the development of work habits, by providing experience in the field of exploratory work and by serving as a stop-gap while the applicant is waiting for a job, it is better to start training immediately in the technical schools in which our sighted friends secure their training. In California, this is an accepted practice in the Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation.

But placement, or the art of making placements, although technically surrounded by a great many general do's

Himself without sight, the writer of this article, California's supervisor of services for the blind, has been demonstrating for many years how blind clients can be successfully guided into satisfying employment.

rehabilitate these 36 persons was \$7,324, or slightly over \$200 per rehabilitant.

The average wage of the 36 rehabilitants after the rehabilitation services were provided was \$34.69 per week, and wages ranged from \$12 per week (part-time) to as much as \$100 per week in the case mentioned above. The total earnings of the group amounted to \$1,249 per week, as compared with \$580.50 per week relief benefits, or \$7,324 total cost of rehabilitation service. In one year at this rate, the total earnings of this group would amount to \$64,948 in comparison with the \$30,186 yearly relief benefits.

Down to Cases

One man and his family were drawing \$33 a week relief; it cost \$532 to rehabilitate him and he is now employed as a painter, earning \$60 a week. A bad knee prevented him from working for months. He was referred to us by the Relief Agency, was provided with an operation, extensive physical therapy, and direct placement.

Our local relief unit referred another man with defective vision, who had been refused employment because of his inability to pass a visual examination. However, in addition to his impaired vision, he had varicose veins of both legs, a condition which undoubtedly would have become aggravated through his working as a farm hand. This man and his family were getting \$24 a week in relief assistance; our Division spent \$159 on his case, and he is now working as a chicken farmer, earning \$25 a week plus his rent, milk, eggs, and "free chickens."

We have a close working relationship with our state welfare agencies, and this cooperation has as its fruition the happiness and security of disabled persons. It is true that not all cases are easily rehabilitated. The older, untrained, disabled person is oftentimes in dire need of employment, and as the unemployment situation grows more serious, such a person becomes a serious placement problem. The majority of our "ready-for-employment" cases consist

of such persons, as is undoubtedly the situation in other states, and we are at present confronted with this grave problem of placement.

On Sound Foundations

The state of Delaware has a definite investment in its rehabilitated citizenry, and we know that this investment is a worth-while one, leading not only to economic security, but also to gratification and contentment on the part of these citizens—a sense of belonging to and being a part of the state's productiveness.

The role which Vocational Rehabilitation plays in changing the status of a state-supported disabled individual to that of a self-supported citizen is as vocationally and socially beneficial to the particular individual as it is profitable to the state. Vocational Rehabilitation plays the important role of counselor and benefactor in this great drama of providing opportunities to the handicapped; but after the curtain has fallen it is the client who judges best Rehabilitation's performance. The following letter from a client reaffirms our faith in the work which we are doing:

Dear Sir:

I can't begin to say how much I appreciate all that you have done for me. Your organization is a wonderful thing, and I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't stepped in. My bill must have been rather large for all the time that I spent in the hospital, but my mind is at ease as the hospital said that you had taken care of everything, and I didn't owe them one penny. I can't put down on paper what's in my heart, but it's something I will never forget. So in closing, I'll say thanks again, and may the Vocational Rehabilitation always be around to help out fellows like myself.

Yours,

T. N. B.

Thank you, friend. We too hope that Vocational Rehabilitation will "always be around."

and don'ts, is still best compared to selling. The sales process is the same as any commercial transaction except that we are selling people into jobs instead of goods in a territory.

Any salesman of even a commercial product will bear me out in the statement that making the initial contact or obtaining the initial interview with the prospect is important. In opening up opportunities for industrial employment, there seem to be many practices in establishing that opening interview or contact. You have heard them all. Some like a "cold canvas"; some prefer to make the initial contact by telephone. Others pave the way by talking about work opportunities for "limited-vision applicants." The list is endless.

Tactics and Techniques

In 1943, upon entering upon my work as rehabilitation officer for the blind in California, I decided that it would be best to "lay it right on the line." We were counseling, training, and placing blind or partially blind people. Why not say so? Employers resisted, which was only natural. But we both knew what we were talking about, and the sales resistance was accordingly easier to overcome.

We began our campaign to overcome existing resistance by approaching employers armed with photographs and testimonial letters from California industrialists who had employed blind workers. Sales resistance grew less and less. Finally, our rehabilitation officers for the blind, all of whom are blind themselves, went into plants and demonstrated job performance right on the assembly line. To guarantee the training of blind workers, they promised to remain on the job with them and to follow up with supervisory calls.

Some have asked if it is essential to limit the number of blind persons in any one plant. The answer must be qualified. If you are thinking of plants where thirty or forty employees are working, probably you would better limit the number. But the reason is not the one commonly given that one might otherwise make a sheltered workshop out of

the industry. The sound basis for decision is the number of jobs the employee can perform. In other words, Is he able to switch from job to job in the plant during the slack season?

There is a reservation here, too, for the seniority principle steps in and determines who shall and shall not work during slack seasons. But if it is one of our large plants that is involved—Lockheed, Northrup, Consolidated, Vultee, for example—there need be no limit on the number of blind persons employed. Much depends on whether our workers are accepted for their skills or because they are "blind workers."

If our public accepts us on the basis of skills rather than as blind workers, it is because we and we alone have created that attitude of mind. If they accept us as blind workers, not because of our skills, I think we have created an illusion. We have set ourselves aside from the normal workaday world and then wonderingly asked "How come?"

The Question of Dependence

Another question often arises: *Should we place a blind person who cannot travel alone?*

All too often, in dealing with a blind person who cannot move about freely unaccompanied, we have labeled him unfit for employment. Yet any of our blind friends, once brought to the plant, move about the premises with ease and facility, performing an excellent job.

Here in California, where many of our large plants are on the outskirts of town, no public transportation is available. Employers have found they cannot secure normally sighted workers unless they provide transportation for them. In fact, right now in many sections, the "share-a-ride" plan still exists. No wonder our rehabilitation workers for the blind felt that if it was all right for normally sighted workers to be taken to their jobs, it was not beneath the dignity of blind persons, who could not travel alone, to be taken in the same manner.

It is preferable that a blind person be trained to travel alone; but if he does not, he need not be excluded from em-

ployment. The challenge may be for him to learn to travel, either with a white cane or with a guide dog. There is room for all to work, both those who travel alone and those who do not.

It would be a mistake, too, not to point out this factor concerning the blind traveling alone: normally, sighted workers do not travel alone. Husbands and wives, friends, and new acquaintances travel to work together. Just stand at the employees' entrance of a factory, and you will be impressed with the fact that traveling alone, as a requisite to employment, is a myth.

There is, however, one exception to what has been said about the importance of ability to travel alone: The placement officer, the rehabilitation officer for the blind, *must* travel alone if he is to be successful.

Raising Jobs From Seed

From 1943 to the present date, a radio station in Southern California has carried a weekly program, "Victory Over Darkness Through Finger Tip Successes," with this slogan, *If you think that we are blind, see our work and change your mind.* On this program each week, we interview an employer of blind people with one of his blind employees.

Six years ago, when I initiated this program, the following procedure was adopted. If we were going to interview an employer who had two or three blind people working in the assembly of plumbing fixtures, using air vises, drill presses, or threading and taping machines, we would send cards to similar companies who had not yet employed blind people, inviting them to listen in. In this way we reached not only the general public but a specified group who had jobs to offer and could perhaps be persuaded to consider our blind friends.

After the program, the rehabilitation officer would call to inquire if the employer had listened. If the answer was "No," the placement officer would then show his photographs and letters of testimony and work toward securing an appointment for a demonstration. Often this resulted in an immediate demon-

stration, and employment of a blind person.

We have increased our coverage since 1943. We now have two Northern California stations carrying our program of "Finger Tip Successes."

Under job development, I wish to leave with you an idea which has been used for especially difficult employers—those employers who have always said "No" emphatically, and who would not even talk with you. An idea which occurred to the writer has paid dividends.

With the practice of reading national magazines and daily newspapers, it was rather simple to cut out a success story about a blind person at least twice a month. As soon as the story was clipped, photostats would be made and mailed to these employers. There would be no comments attached—only my business card. Sometimes the clippings referred to the type of business the employer was engaged in, sometimes not.

But the effect was positive in the long run. Over the years, this practice has paid off in breaking down sales resistance, opening the way for placement of more and more blind workers.

From Client to Employee

There was a time when those in the know said, "If you want to succeed as a placement officer, place only the best." This principle, I believe, is no longer applicable.

Naturally, as we celebrate our centennial and compare methods of the pioneer 49-ers with up-to-date methods, we are impressed with the effects of progress. In the same manner old clichés which once applied to placement work should be re-examined for accuracy. We should be the last to admit that we do not progress. Although in many cases it may still be necessary to make your opening successes in an industrial plant by placing the best you have, a thorough examination of job processes always brings forth jobs for the average, too.

Let me cite two important cases to illustrate my point.

In a Southern California electric light socket manufacturing company, the

extra special blind workers were operating punch presses and drill presses. Yet there were three jobs which any average person could perform: namely, the fitting of screws in contact posts. The question here was not the matter of the employability of our applicant, but the ingenuity of the placement officer—his ability to find the job which matched the available skill of the applicant.

My second illustration has to do with a situation in Northern California. Here a badge company, having accepted a blind person, a girl, for the assembling of plastic badges, found that she did good work, but was not fast enough to meet production quotas. Examination of the job for a replacement, this time by a blind placement officer, brought forth the old chestnut, "We have tried one blind person, and we have found that blind people are not employable here."

Not being particularly impressed with this statement, the placement officer examined the number of girls employed by the plant compared with the number of men employed. Finding that there was very little labor turnover in male workers and a great deal in female workers, he casually asked if it would not be advisable to hire only male employees to solve the labor turnover problem. The personnel director understood the implication without further discussion, but an intelligent discussion followed regarding "sighted workers being the blind workers of the future." It was brought out that all workers, whether blind or sighted, are individuals subject to the same human failings and positive actions.

I am happy to say that the company re-employed blind workers.

I point out this approach to you because we must stop thinking of placing our "super specials" only. We must intelligently place everyone who comes along. They must be placed on the basis of their skills, not what we think their skills should be.

Train, counsel—yes. Find out what the applicant's level of potential achievement may be. But let us do it in terms of real rehabilitation — "rendering an

individual fit to engage in remunerative employment."

If we have lost employers, we have used the wrong approach. We have not spent enough time in education. We have not conditioned the employer to accept blind people as they are, the same basis on which he accepts sighted people.

In the last analysis, the challenge is to the placement officer to condition employers, to find the job suitable for the highest production capacity of each blind person, not just the best. This is the basis on which our people in the sighted, workaday world are placed. Not all are equal in capacity. So why should we think that our blind friends are or must be?

Where the Blind Excel

I feel we should not close this article without referring to the relative merits of sighted placement officers as compared with blind placement workers.

My experience over the past twenty-seven years has been that although a few sighted officers achieve success, blind rehabilitation officers do the best job. There is a natural reason for this. There is no better "showcase" for the ability of the blind than the blind placement officer himself.

We in California operate through six districts, with the seventh district starting on July first of this year. There are six blind rehabilitation officers distributed throughout four districts. The remaining three districts will be served temporarily by a consultant service available to the Vocational Rehabilitation officers who are sighted. When finances permit, these three districts will have a rehabilitation officer for the blind assigned to them.

Pointing out the advisability of blind rather than sighted officers sometimes poses this question: "Suppose you do not have trained blind placement officers?" The answer is simple. In our case loads we must have some blind people being trained for employment who are academically and technically skilled to be placement officers. As we

are rehabilitation experts, we might guide them into the placement field.

To illustrate our particular emphasis here in California on the feasibility of employing blind placement officers, I might point out that our six blind workers rehabilitated 121 applicants between July 1, 1948 and January 1, 1949—an average of 20 rehabilitations per worker. Thus they accomplished in one half-year a better average than the 18 rehabilitations set as standard by the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation for a full year.

I have not written this article because I wanted the experts to agree with me. I have reported only that which

has been tried and successfully accomplished in one of the forty-eight states

The two people who have influenced me most in my views on work for the blind, and from whom I have drawn much inspiration, are my first employer, who gave me understanding of the blind through his own infinite patience and breadth of vision, and my Vocational Rehabilitation chief, for whom I started work twenty years later. It was Harry D. Hicker who gave me my first lesson in the "positive approach." He it was who informed me that once you have confidence in human nature there is no such thing as "it can't be done." If you think so, someone will soon come along and embarrass you by doing it.

When to Say No

In Michigan we like to say yes. Believing that faith, imagination, preparation, and perseverance will overcome almost any obstacle, we are slow to reject as vocationally hopeless any disabled person who calls upon us for help. But if one delights in being able to say yes on a generous scale—to the severely handicapped, to the homebound, and even to the bedfast—it is absolutely necessary that he learn when to respond with a firmly spoken no.

How can one recognize those occasions? Are there general principles which can be cited in support of the negative decision? It seems to me that there are—eight of them. Here is the list, complete with illustrations.

FIRST: You should say no when you don't have the ability to do the job.

Illustration—Psychological examinations are fundamental in any guidance program; but some states have few local facilities for the required testing and interpretation and no specialized personnel on the rehabilitation staff. When requested to give technical psychological services, it is better to say no than to rely upon fallacious findings.

SECOND: You should say no when the request is unreasonable.

Illustration—A crippled girl once came to my office, asking to be sent to a certain college. It did not have the courses required by her preferred objective, but the girl and her parents insisted on this unwise choice because the college had such a beautiful campus.

THIRD: You should say no when your rules demand no.

Illustration—One of the general rules of Vocational Rehabilitation is that no services are paid for unless they were authorized in advance. One hearing-aid salesman attempted to use the state office as a collection agency for his poor accounts, even threatening to repossess the aids, though their purchase had never been authorized by the state.

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Septinelli, A.E.

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